

SundayReview | OPINION

Black Kids Don't Want to Read About Harriet Tubman All the Time

By DENENE MILLNER MARCH 10, 2018

Atlanta — I'm pretty sure I hadn't even wiped the sonogram goop off my belly before I rushed off to pick out dresses and books for my unborn child. I was on a mission: My daughter was going to need all the pink dresses and all the books with brown babies.

Finding adorable dresses was easy. Finding children's literature with pictures of children of color was not.

Books with white children and, like, ducks, were de rigueur, which I guess was fine for parents who were having white babies or ducks. But this was not going to work for my brown baby, who would spend a lifetime looking for her image in a pop cultural landscape that all but ignored children who looked like her. I wanted — needed — her to see her beautiful brown self reflected in the music and stories I hoped to feed to her as consistently as food. In my house, she would be visible.

Eventually, a friend helped me track down Ezra Jack Keats's "The Snowy Day," and the lovely "More More More," Said the Baby." And my stepson gave his copy of Nikki Giovanni's "The Sun Is So Quiet" to his baby sister. I eventually discovered the treasure trove that is Just Us Books, and works by Andrea Davis Pinkney and Eloise Greenfield. Still, the pickings were slim.

4

ARTICLES REMAINING

[SEE MY OPTIONS](#)[Subscriber login](#)

Need Diverse Books and people like Marley Dias, a voracious reader who, at age 11, started the #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign. All that talking produced some results: Of the 3,500 children's books published in the United States last year, 319 featured black characters, according to the Cooperative Children's Book Center. That was a slight improvement from previous years. Still, only 116 of them were written or illustrated by black people.

There is another story to be told here — one that goes beyond the numbers and into the words. The “diverse” books making it to the shelves aren't very diverse at all. With few exceptions, the same stories are being told again and again, fed to children like some bowl of dry, lumpy oatmeal with just a sprinkle of brown sugar to make it go down a little easier.

The typical children's picture books featuring black characters focus on the degradation and endurance of our people. You can fill nearly half the bookshelves in the Schomburg with children's books about the civil rights movement, slavery, basketball players and musicians, and various “firsts.” These stories consistently paint African-Americans as the aggrieved and the conquerors, the agitators and the superheroes who fought for their right to be recognized as full human beings.

Don't get me wrong, I appreciate those kinds of books; our history deserves an airing with all children. But I'm not trying to have my kid float off into dreamland with visions of helping runaway slaves to freedom, or marching through a parade of barking dogs and fire hoses, or the subject matter of Billie Holiday's “Strange Fruit” — yes, there is a children's book devoted to this song protesting lynching.

Meanwhile, stories about the everyday beauty of being a little human being of color are scarce. Regardless of what the publishing industry seems to think, our babies don't spend their days thinking about Harriet Tubman, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and black bodies swinging; they're excited about what the tooth fairy will leave under their pillows, contemplating their first ride on the school bus, looking for dragons in their closets.

They want to read books that engage with their everyday experiences, featuring characters who look like them. Just like any other child. White children, too, deserve

— and need — to see black characters that revel in the same human experiences that they do.

Real diversity would celebrate the mundane — like a little kid going out after a snowstorm — rather than the exceptional.

One of my first books, “Early Sunday Morning,” about a little girl overcoming her jitters as she prepares to sing her first choir solo, was roundly rejected by editors when I pitched it back in 2003. They just couldn’t connect with the black-family-getting-ready-for-church ritual that starts on Saturday. They didn’t get how black Baptist church communities devote themselves to nurturing children in ways beyond the Bible.

And I have to presume that they couldn’t see past skin color to embrace the story’s lesson: Pushing past fear is hard, but, with the help of family, you can learn to be courageous. It’s a universal lesson for all little humans, no matter their race.

All this led me to create my own children’s book imprint. We published “Early Sunday Morning” last year, and many of the black parents and children who are buying it now have told me they are grateful for the story.

I’ve been grateful for a number of recent books, including Vanessa Brantley-Newton’s “Grandma’s Purse,” and Bunmi Laditan’s “The Big Bed.” Everyone can relate to the subjects here — the magical bond between children and grandparents, and a pushy kid’s takeover of the parental bed. Color is of no consequence to the stories, but it still matters to black children looking for themselves in the pages.

The success of these books proves that parents, teachers, librarians and children are craving stories that celebrate the humanity and everyday experiences of black children and families. There is a demand — just look at the excitement around the new movies “Black Panther” and “A Wrinkle in Time,” both starring black characters — even if some in the industry have struggled to recognize it.

Change is happening. This year, Jacqueline Woodson, whose stories about black life have racked up prestigious awards, was named the national ambassador for

young people’s literature. And several publishing houses have recently announced “diversity” imprints they insist will fill the void.

But if the same editors at the same publishing houses are pushing the same tales about Harriet Tubman, Dr. King, Muhammad Ali, and how black people “overcame,” often written and illustrated by white writers and artists, well, they will have missed the opportunity to really nourish our children.

Let the kids eat.

Denene Millner is the editor of Denene Millner Books, an imprint of Agate Publishing, and the author of “Early Sunday Morning.”

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on March 11, 2018, on Page SR10 of the New York edition with the headline: She Wants More Than M.L.K. at Bedtime.